

This book is intended for the conductor with some experience of choral directing, for the chorister, or even the solo singer. In all these categories, it is assumed that the reader has an understanding of the general basics (as found in *Kick-start your choir*), and an awareness of the voice (*Mike Brewer's Warm-ups!*). Once the vocal engine is up and running, and a few miles have been covered, the concept of 'fine-tuning' comes into play.

By offering advice on intonation, rehearsing and performance skills, *Fine-tune your choir* will help to refine the sound of your choir and further explore the many facets of choral music – including singing in unfamiliar languages, reading skills, and particularly the thrill of creating a choral blend. It is not intended as an academic text, but offers an accessible introduction to the varied techniques involved in choral singing, and opens up opportunities for exploration in new areas. It is strongly advised that you also refer to the *Recommended further reading* section on page 47. But above all, have fun!



## 6 Flexibility

Real music rarely consists of pure *legato*, endless *staccato* or constant dynamics. The secret lies in finding an appropriate combination of techniques to create the musical effect required. It is therefore important to know what we want to achieve with any musical phrase. Remember, in a rehearsal, don't say what you want: show what you want!

### *Legato*

A common failure of understanding among singers is what *legato* actually is. A simple way to develop awareness is to think of instrumental techniques:

- ❖ Sing a simple scale slowly to a vowel.
- ❖ Listen to the sound and see how much it changes during each note, and from note to note.

In real *legato* you cannot hear the join between the notes. Air flows smoothly so the larynx is not 'pushed' on each note. Support muscles should be fully engaged, vowels merge effortlessly, and resonant consonants keep the sound alive. Lip and tongue consonants flick quickly and clearly, causing minimal disturbance to the flow.

- ❖ Ask the choir to sing a slow glide to join up notes of different pitches. This will keep the vocal apparatus energised, and the sound even.
- ❖ Repeat, speeding up the glide.
- ❖ Use conducting gestures to reinforce the choir's visual memory for *legato*. Vertical movements tend to collapse the breathing and work against you, while horizontal movements are magically effective in maintaining tone.
- ❖ Use images, for example: a violin bow moving evenly over the string, with wrist movement at the bow change. (Try at different speeds and with different imaginary weight applied with the bow arm.) Ironing a long item like a sheet or trousers; spreading butter over a long loaf of bread; flattening sand in a large tray. (Arm weight links directly to the muscles of support when breathing, and evens and deepens the sound.)

## 8 Language

The musical style of different cultures depends very much on the inflections and vocal colours of the language, coupled with traditions of performing. 'Authentic' performances of music of the past aim to recreate a way of performing not only musical phrases but also idiomatic pronunciation. If we want to speak another language, there is no substitute for talking to a native speaker; no list of hints can replace the real thing. What follows is not a comprehensive guide and cannot replace the real experience of a culture, or a course of study. However, it does offer shorthand ways to get a feel for singing in some different languages and styles, which work in choral singing. Most importantly, native English speakers should try not to think of English sounds when assembling words in another language. Instead, work from the ground upwards and aim for the natural sound colours described below.

### Italian

- ❖ The exercises on starting a vowel in *Mike Brewer's Warm-ups!* originate from Italian singing. The sound begins cleanly, without glottal noise and without 'h'. This can be called 'Mixed onset'.



Italian consonants don't get in the way ...

- ❖ Italian is a language based on vowels. The seven vowels are: a ('at'), e ('egg'), i ('ee'), o ('odd'), u ('oo').
- ❖ Italian consonants don't get in the way. Keep the mouth shape for the vowel, and consonants will work easily.
  - 'c' is pronounced as the English 'ch'.
  - 'gh' is 'g' as in 'go'.